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PHOTOGRAPHER / ARTIST / EDUCATOR

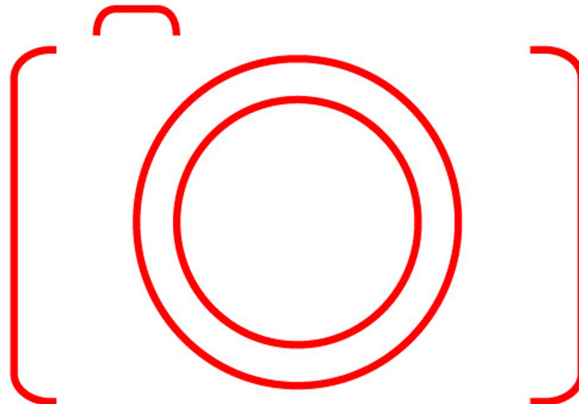
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ON PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTFOLIOS

for the Park West Camera Club, November 2019

PARK WEST



CAMERA CLUB

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"You're never going to end up where you think you're going to end up... A true creator knows that you follow the thing to where it's going, not to where you think it ought to go..." – Adam Savage (host of MythBusters, sculptor, movie model-maker, polymath and autodidact) from Tim Ferriss' podcast, episode 307.

It's tempting to believe great photographs come from "out there," but the pictures that seem to arrive as magical gifts from the photo gods actually come from "in here." The key to a great portfolio is creating, arranging, and presenting pictures that are an authentic reflection of YOU. Pictures that reflect the places and things you're intuitively drawn to – that resonate with your obsessions, your emotions, your spirit – are going to be a lot more interesting than a compilation of images around an abstract theme. Creating a portfolio isn't just a game of concentration; it's more than collecting a bunch of pictures of similar subjects. There's a world of difference between what pictures are *of*, and what they're *about*. For example, some of my landscape photographs are of Iceland, but I hope they're about something else: stuff that's bigger than us...Elemental, unseen forces. Geological time. "Thin" places. Magic. When you're putting together a portfolio, focus on what *your* pictures are *about*, not what they're *of*.

A great portfolio is the result of experimentation, play, trial-and-error, and pattern recognition. To paraphrase Adam Savage (quoted above), you need to listen to what your pictures are telling you, rather than trying to force your will upon them. It's helpful to think about each body of work as analogous to a song, symphony, or poem. The meaning and feeling of a group of pictures changes dramatically, depending on how they're sequenced – just like words, or musical notes. So make sure your portfolio isn't composed of the same note over and over again. Build in quiet passages and crescendos to create variations on your theme. Play with the making of and arrangement of your work until things start to look and feel right – until a body of work starts to make sense, visually. After all, photographs speak to a very different part of our heart-minds than words do. When we put together a portfolio of photographs, we're not working with ideas. Try to approach this kind of work with a different mindset than the one you use for everyday problem-solving. This is about seeing, not thinking.

Thinking leads us in the direction of the literal, making it more likely we'll end up with a portfolio called "Pictures of Flowers," or "My Pictures of South East Asia," rather than something more compelling, like "Duets," or "While I Was Sleeping." (These are the titles of two portfolios on Stu

Zaro's website, <https://lefteyepix.com>, which has great examples of non-literal photographic portfolios.)

It's also worth checking out "A Note on the cover of Greg Heisler's book," an essay by Sean Kernan (not to mention the rest of his website): <https://bit.ly/2K4qHBH>. (Or go to the "writing" section of Seankernan.com, and look for the link.) What Kernan's essay is really about, and what I'm inviting you to do, is to ask yourself about the difference between an interesting picture and a picture of an interesting thing. (Hat-Tip to Cig Harvey.) As long as your pictures rely on interesting things you'll never get to where you really want to go, which is making pictures that transcend the mere recording of what was in front of the camera – and entering into the realm of photographic transformation. Minor White called the camera "a metamorphosing machine." How can you transform the raw material of the chaotic world we live in, and the RAW files that come out of your camera, into something that's really and truly yours?

One way is to think metaphorically. Pictures are all visual metaphors – a language of their own, that Greg Heisler calls "the narrative code of light." Honor that. Focus on how things *look*, rather than what they are. When you title your pictures or write about them, it's often better to be poetic than literal; think about the difference between a snapshot and a *Photograph* with a capital "p." What if you're a documentary photographer? Even then, the best work transcends straightforward description. Think about Sebastião Salgado's work. It's as documentary as it gets, and it's profoundly poetic. Likewise, my friend Karen Zusman's work, which also entwines poetry and documentary photography (<https://karenzusman.photoshelter.com/index>).

Practical tips to help you with your process:

1) Don't know what to do next? Get into action. Do *something*. Make a picture. Start editing. Write some notes. Make a print. Creativity is about engaging in a process. It's not about knowing where you're going or knowing how things are going to turn out. One thing leads to another. Stephen King and Steven Pressfield both say the muse arrives when we sit down to work. (Both of these super-successful authors have written a lot about writing. If you haven't read King's "On Writing," or Pressfield's "The War of Art" – not to mention his blog – you're in for a real treat.)

2) Find ways to "cook" your work consistently. Photographs are like food, and a portfolio is like a multi-course meal. Making the flavors of the dishes consistent creates a more satisfying experience for the diner. On a superficial level, consistent subject matter helps with this. Photographically, consistency can be created by using a similar color palette or processing style for all of the images. Printing on the same paper, or at the same size can help. When I'm working on a new body of work I'll print a signature image on many different papers, and at different sizes to see which one feels right. I'll try out different styles of framing, and experiment with different ways to deliver the work to a viewer. If you "listen" carefully, your pictures will tell you how they like to be printed, what size they want to be, and which frames they like best. When you strike upon the right "flavor" you'll know it.

3) Print all the photographs you're thinking about (for a portfolio, book, exhibition, etc.) using a black-and-white laser printer and plain paper. Lay them all out on the floor and play with arranging and rearranging them. This is a great way to see which pictures want to be together, which pictures want to lead, which pictures want to follow, and which pictures don't work well with each other. It's also a test of which pictures are strong enough to show to an audience. The good ones will work, even when they're printed badly. If a picture loses all its charm when it's printed on plain paper – if it's totally dependent on being printed well – you might want to rethink whether it's good enough to show.

4) Find ways to present the work in a way that signifies to the viewer that this work is worth looking at. Make books. Use nice boxes. Create web-galleries, or slideshows with music. Exhibit your work.

5) Show your pictures to a friend – preferably someone who's not involved in photography. The hard part is to resist the temptation to tell them what you're up to. Don't tell them any stories about the pictures, or the experiences you had while photographing. Provide as little context as possible. Simply hand them the pictures, patiently give them time to look, and ask them what they think the pictures are about. Then *listen*. (Don't talk!) This is a tremendous opportunity to measure whether what you think the pictures say is what they convey when you're not speaking for them. It's an opportunity to measure if there's a disconnect between the story that's in your head, and the story your pictures are actually telling. If what your friend says aligns with what you hoped the work was about, congratulations! If not, back to the drawing board! Keep playing, experimenting, rearranging, until it does.

A few questions to ask yourself:

- Can you tell someone what the work is *about* (as distinct from the subject matter/what the work is of) in a way that a 13-year-old would understand?
- What adjectives describe the underlying strength of your best work?
- What are you interested in? What are you drawn to? (in life, not just pictures.)
- Can you answer the (compassionately asked) question: "Why should I care?"
- Can you find a way to elevate the work beyond the literal? How are you going to transform your pictures into something authentically yours – something that goes beyond a description of what was in front of the camera?
- Is this *your* song, or a cover of someone else's? (Covers can be good, too. We just need to be aware of what we're up to.)
- Can you push the work a little further, delve a little deeper?

Directions:

go inward,

then inward,

then turn inward,

and then keep going...

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Visual Alchemy: Take Your Pictures from “Almost” to “Wow”

Just like magicians, the best photographers are always working to focus and direct viewers’ attention. In fact, virtually all photographic enhancements – analog or digital – are forms of sleight-of-hand, developed to achieve the same goal: to subliminally focus attention on the important parts of the photograph.

Counter-intuitively, the range of darkroom work seems fairly narrow: you can make parts of a picture lighter or darker (burning and dodging), change the contrast (paper grade), and change the color (toning/ color-correction). That’s pretty much it. Seems pretty limiting, doesn’t it? The amazing part is, well-used, these seemingly basic tools dramatically transform the impact and feeling of an image.

Photoshop work, LightRoom adjustments, camera position, lens selection, focus, and lighting are different ways to accomplish the same thing: to direct attention. The key is to start with a good image, and make it better. Photography is all about re-directing attention. The alchemy of light, focus, color, and gesture (thank you Jay Maisel), is what transforms the everyday into the extraordinary.

Where does our attention go? And why?

Photographs may not be a matter of life and death, but the way we see is. Vision plays a big part in our hardwired survival strategy as human beings.

"Where the eye lands in an image is not much different between monkeys and humans," says USC grad student David Berg, who studies visual stimuli in monkey brains. "Eyes, mouth corners, the top of the lip -- people and monkeys look for emotional significance in a face." ¹

As a function of Darwinian selection, the way we see has evolved to focus on patterns first -- then light to dark, high-sharpness to low-sharpness, in-focus to blurred, and high-saturation to low-saturation. These are all forms of contrast. By heightening our awareness, and adding or minimizing contrast in our pictures, we can consciously design images that focus attention where we want it.

What demands attention?

Human beings are drawn to: faces, potential threats, edges, novelty, emotional content, ambiguity, as well as burnt-out highlights, blocked-up shadows, and strong colors.

"I'm not interested in photography. I'm interested in geometry and emotion."

- Henri Cartier-Bresson ²

Composition is just a fancy way of talking about the geometry of an image: circles, lines, diagonals. Ask yourself: does my picture have emotion? Geometry? Is there good separation between subject and background? Between tones? Do the light, color, tone, focus, perspective, scale, and presentation all work towards the same goal?

Strategies and Tools for Visually Directing and Re-directing Attention:

- For evaluation: Step back (literally) from your monitor and squint to see where your eye is drawn.
- To direct attention: Increase contrast on subject/create color contrast; dark against light/light against dark.
- Focus (shallow/selective focus, especially to isolate and emphasize subject).
- Lens selection/focal-length/f-stop (to isolate or include – and to maximize/minimize DOF).
- Burning and dodging (darkening and lightening):
 - LR & ACR brushes, gradients, post-crop vignetting; masked adjustment layers in PS.
 - Darken edges: post-crop vignette/gradient tools in LR or ACR, masked adjustment layers in PS.
- Studio lighting/flash/fill-light (darken background/lighten subject; create/control contrast & color).
 - On-camera flash: manual mode for overall exposure, with flash exposure compensation for subject.

Notice the list above isn't separated into categories: camera and darkroom, lighting and post-processing. These strategies and tools are all part of an interrelated continuum – photography is a process!

Websites and Examples:

Rolfe Horn website – analog darkroom transformations:

<http://rolfehorn.com/html/tech/index.html> (Click on each image to see "before and after.")

Ansel Adams Moonrise before and after:

<http://rcodaphotography.blogspot.com/2010/01/inspirations-24-moonrise.html>

To understand what draws our attention, how and why, see "Spot" on different backgrounds:

<http://super.nova.org/DPR/COIforTHOU/>

...and more about visual perception: <http://super.nova.org/DPR/Perception/>

The Photographer's Guide to the Eye:

"What science is learning about how we see can help you take more compelling pictures."

www.popphoto.com/news/2010/02/photographers-guide-eye?page=0,2

Citations:

1. *The Photographer's Guide to the Eye*

<http://www.popphoto.com/news/2010/02/photographers-guide-eye>

2. *The Genius of Photography*

BBC 2008 Documentary Series

ABBREVIATIONS:

ACR = Adobe Camera Raw

DOF = depth-of-field

LR = LightRoom

PS = Photoshop

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PHOTOGRAPHIC PROCESSING FUNDAMENTALS

Notes & Reminders

Big Ideas:

To do great “darkroom” work, we need to learn to see every picture as an abstraction of lines, circles, squares, triangles, light and dark areas, and edges. If we can detach ourselves from the subject, and the experience we had while shooting the picture, we can start to see what the picture has to say for itself, see whether it stands on its own, and figure out what it needs to really “sing.” Standing back a bit, metaphorically and literally, allows us to see where attention goes – so we can decide how to redirect the attention to where we want it to go. I think of it as balancing or re-balancing the picture.

The most important area is the place we want the viewer’s eye to rest – and keep returning to. In order to do effective “darkroom” work, we need to decide where that is – before we start adjusting – otherwise, how do we know what to adjust?

Quick Checklist for Great Pictures:

- Is it a good picture? Is it about something?
- Is anything missing?
- Is anything in the frame competing with the subject for attention?
- Is the conversion from RAW or color to B&W “right” for what I want from this picture?
- Does my picture have a full range of tones? In the most important part of the picture?
- Does the “darkroom” work direct attention where I want it to go?
- Is my “darkroom” work invisible, or does it call attention to itself?
- Is there enough contrast, drama, black? (Making shadows too open reduces drama.)
- Have I avoided burnt out highlights?
- Does the presentation/printing resonate with the image?

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JEAN MIELE's personal interest in perception, spirituality and mysticism have inspired and informed his photographs since the mid-1980s. He particularly loves photography's magical ability to explore the borderlands between fiction and reality, and to help us remember who we are. Whether the subject matter is black-and-white landscape, allegorical photomontage, or quasi-documentary images of abandoned industrial sites, Miele is interested in making pictures that connect with what's metaphorically "bigger than us." His images remind us that moments of perfection are possible – and that we each create our own reality. He believes every photograph is an act of transformation, and that the photographs we make tell us more about ourselves than about what was in front of the lens.

Miele has written for photo publications and websites, and is well-known as an educator whose workshops, seminars, and one-on-one instructionals demystify digital and empower students to realize their own photographic vision. He has taught Photoshop workshops and presented "Digital Darkroom" seminars for: Adobe, Apple, APA, ASMP, Fuji USA, ICP, Maine Media Workshops, Santa Fe Photographic Workshops, Anderson Ranch, the Palm Beach Photographic Centre, the Norwegian Fotografiakademiet, and many others. He has also appeared as a guest lecturer on photography at SVA, NYU, and the Columbia University School of Journalism.

Gino (as he's known to his friends), is happily married, a lifelong Brooklynite, and really likes to sail. His photographs have been exhibited internationally, appeared in thousands of publications, and acquired by collectors worldwide.

For more, please visit: www.jeanmiele.com & www.facebook.com/JeanMielePhotographer

For an in-depth interview, check out: <https://rfotofolio.org/2013/07/18/jean-miele/>